

The Jesus Movement of the late 60's and early 70's

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March 27, 2010

The Jesus Movement began in the late 60's and continued through the early 70's. Its locus was the western United States although there were similar movements world-wide. To understand the Jesus Movement, it may be helpful at this point to take a step back and consider the Hippie Movement as a whole. The Hippie Movement was a rebellion against what became known in the 1950's as "the American Way" - a system that "entailed-private property, capitalistic and consumer opportunity for all, the right to adhere to a religion that respected a Judeo-Christian ethos, and the right to vote in a democracy that supported the former criteria." (Shires 2007, 7)

Although Christianity in the 1950's gave the appearance of uniformity, under the surface many mainline Protestant churches were in a process of transformation that had begun in the late 1800's as theologians sought a synthesis between enlightenment thinking and the Bible. By the mid 1900's the theology of many mainline Protestant churches had boiled down the essentials of Christianity to 'love' and made social progress the primary goal of Christianity in the world. This 'stripping down' of Christianity by dismissing the supernatural was at the heart of the 'death of God' theology propounded towards the end of the 60's. Author Harvey Cox, in *Secular City*, said that those who would seek after God would find him by helping their fellow man rather than in reading their Bibles.

The result of this transformation was the compartmentalization of knowledge. “Religious knowledge confined itself to the nature of God - as reinterpreted according to the parameters of modern science... Thus redefined, mainstream religion no longer attempted to explain physical phenomena as subject to radical or miraculous supernatural alteration.” (Shires 2007, 27) This synthesis allowed “modernists to be both Christians and scientists, or even Christians and technocrats.” (Shires 2007, 27) However, the alliance between Christianity and “the system” and relegation of religion to matters of the heart was rejected by many youth who “were on a quest of a more pervasive spirituality” (Shires 2007, 13) This is evident in the statistics for church attendance. The period between 1940 to 1965 was a period of overall growth in church attendance, with attendance peaking in 1947 at 76% and stabilizing at 73% in the period from 1952-1965. But by 1970 this number had dropped to 40%. (Flowers 1984, 41) In 1957, 14% of people interviewed in a Gallup poll thought that religion was losing influence but by 1968 this number increased to 67%. (Handy 1977, 422)

This drop in church attendance did not correspond with a drop in interest in spirituality. As Shire notes, “Youth rejected the old religion that had quarantined spirituality in time and place, they searched for something overarching. And in this search they became eclectic and intrigued by all things religious, hoping to find a religion that quickened all aspects of life, encompassing all thought and behavior.” This eclecticism led many to read both the words of Jesus and the Bahgavad Vita, taking from them whatever they found useful. The use of LSD was often combined with overtly ‘Christian’ experiences. In an interview with the former wife of one prominent hippie preacher, Lonnie Frisbee, Connie Frisbee recounts one incident that illustrates how drugs and the Bible were combined in unorthodox ways.

“So we drove out to Taquitz falls. He [Lonnie] wanted to go to the very top falls. He opened his back pack and he spread out (*sic*) and he had LSD and he had marijuana and he had all of his oil paints and he proceeded to paint a picture of Jesus on the rock, a full size picture of Jesus on the rock. Then he pulled out his Bible and got kinda in the yoga position and he said, “We are going to read the Bible now.” He was reading about John the Baptist and how John the Baptist baptized and he baptized us up at Taqua Falls. Even though we were all on drugs.” (Sabatino 2001)

Steve Hefner, one of the original members of a well known Christian commune called ‘The Living Room’ in the Haight-Asbury district of San Francisco, recounts his conversion experience, “I took my LSD and laid down on the floor a couple hours and when I could get together to get up, I got up as a Christian, it was just that simple.” (Sabatino 2001)

Two themes that characterized the spirituality of the hippie movement were adherence to the golden rule and individualism. One had to be free to search without constraints. Much of the rebellion of this period was motivated by the perceived hypocrisy of their parent’s culture. “Jesus supposedly had long hair, why shouldn’t I?” was typical of conversations replayed in household’s across America. This was a period of casting off every stricture that did not make sense. The focus of preaching during this period reflected a move from “the angry father above to the mother-love qualities of the divine.” (Sabatino 1999, 4) Typical of this positive, ‘feel good’ message are the lyrics of a song sung on the Kathryn Kuhlman Show by a band appropriately named *Love Song*,

Welcome back to the things that you once believed in.

Welcome back to what you knew was right from the start.

All you had to do was to be what you always wanted to be.

Welcome back to the love that is in your heart

I can see that you know better now

You never were the untruthful kind

Yeah I am so happy now to welcome you back. (Bill Wam957, *Jesus Freaks Part 4*)

Preaching was also characterized by the adoption of countercultural slang. “God is blowing every bodies mind!” was typical. Even Billy Graham occasionally adopted hippie slang. Speaking to a crowd of 8,000 at Berkley, he challenged listeners, “Why not experiment with Christ? He’s an experience.” (Sabatino 1999, 220) At a festival in Miami where Graham shared the stage with the Grateful Dead and Santana, he told the crowd that there was a way “to get high without hang-ups and hangovers.” (Sabatino 1999, 221) The theme of radicalism and revolution was also common. Footage of preaching from the video, *Son Worshippers*, offers one example, “Peace is not the absence of war, it is the presence of happiness. You radicals, you want a revolution? [holds up Bible] You got it. This is not a revolution without bloodshed... Uncle Sam, Jesus wants you.” (Bill Wam957, *The Son Worshippers*)

Although the Jesus Movement was often characterized by anti-intellectualism, there were some who sought to fill the intellectual vacuum. Francis Schaeffer, a missionary in Europe, despaired at the hopelessness he saw in the hippie movement. He gained international acclaim after publishing: *Escape From Reason, The God Who is There* and *How Now Should We Then Live*. Francis, together with his wife Edith, founded L’Abri at their chalet in the Swiss Alps which became a magnet for seekers from all over the world. The Schaeffer’s discussions with students

were taped and soon, study groups worldwide were listening to the 'Chalet tapes'. In 1968 Schaeffer toured 14 cities in the U.S. At Harvard, Christian students prepared for Schaeffer's lectures by wearing a button that said 'Schaeffer is not a Beer'. They passed out flyers that invited students to come to a talk by a "philosopher-critic-theologian-organizer of a community in Switzerland where scholars and students gather to analyze and discuss topics of major contemporary importance..." (Schaeffer 1984, 527) In the opening sentence of Schaeffer's influential book, *The God Who is There*, Schaeffer states clearly the premise that forms the basis for much of his writing and teaching. He writes, "The present chasm between the generations has been brought about almost entirely by a change in the concept of truth." (Schaeffer 1968, 13) Schaeffer dates this shift to around 1913-1940 in the United States. He states that during this time period humanistic philosophy gained ascendancy. This humanism or 'rationalism' he defined as a "system where man, beginning absolutely by himself, tries rationally to build out from himself, having only man as his integration point, to find all knowledge, meaning and value." (Schaeffer 1968, 17) Schaeffer saw the effects of rationalism as that of utter despair; man was reduced to utter meaninglessness. Schaeffer traces a "line of despair" from the dialectics of Hegel and the existentialism of Kierkegaard through the art of van Gogh and Gauguin to pop culture as exhibited in the psychedelic music of the Beatles. He believed that the largely middle class evangelical church in America was disconnected from the youth in their midst and ignorant of the culture around them. Schaeffer's use of culture as a means of understanding the seismic shifts in society combined with a persona that resembled a cross between Swiss mountaineer and intellectual resonated with young seekers who were not otherwise receptive to ministers within the 'establishment'.

One of the defining features of the Jesus Movement was a belief that the moral, political and religious upheaval was a sign of the end times. The Age of Aquarius was actually the Last Days. Hal Lindsey wrote *Late Great Planet Earth* in 1970 and it would remain a best seller throughout the 1970's. In the book Lindsey suggests that the return of the Jews to Israel, the emergence of Communist Russia as a world power, the formation of the European common market and the rise of China were all signs of the end times and the fulfillment of prophecy. Although he never established a date, he writes, "If this is a correct deduction [that a generation is equal to 40 years], then within forty years or so of 1948, all these things could take place [the tribulation and Second Advent of Christ]." (Lindsey 1970, 54) Lindsey's book effectively brought a certain brand of dispensational prophecy to the masses.

The Jesus People Movement was by no means a unified movement. Some aspects of the movement were clearly cultic while others were closely connected with mainstream evangelicalism. For example, Ted Wise, founder of 'the Living Room', was mentored by Pastor John MacDonald of First Baptist Church, Mill Valley California. MacDonald recognized in Ted a man who could connect to hippies while he could not. They had many disagreements, "mainly because the hippies regarded Jesus as a churchless hippie and the Holy Ghost as a free spirit who despised the fundamentalist's sectarian manners, "square" rituals, and restricted lifestyle." (Shires 2007, 116) What they did share in common though, was a desire to speak Christ to their generation. Another example of this crossover from mainstream evangelicalism to the hippie scene was Arthur Blessit. Raised a conservative Baptist by his mother, he had often accompanied his alcoholic father into bars as a child. He used that experience to evangelize in bars along LA's Sunset Boulevard. Sabatino points out that many of the members of the Jesus movement were never really a part of the hippie scene but were teenagers who had grown up in

conservative churches and were seeking to forge their own identity. Campus Crusade for Christ, a mainstream evangelical organization, thrived during this time period. They organized Explo 72' which drew 80,000 young people to Dallas and was billed as the Christian alternative to Woodstock; the "largest youth training conference in church history." (Shires 2007, 121) Explo 72' symbolized not only the size and influence of the Jesus Movement, but also its acceptance into mainstream evangelicalism.

The Jesus Movement has left a significant legacy. Many of those caught up in the spirit of the late 60's and early 70's transitioned into a more sedate lifestyle. Some went to seminary or got married and found jobs. Shires points out that many that took leading roles in the Christian right movement came out of the Jesus People movement. For example, Melody Green, wife of Keith Green, a popular singer in the early 70's, founded 'Americans Against Abortion' which eventually brought a Petition for Life with 3 million signatures to the White House. Some of the more militant anti-abortion advocates used much the same rhetoric as the violent anti-war movements. Randy Phillips, the first president of Promise Keepers, a Christian group focused on restoring family values, "came to know Christ during the 'Jesus Movement' of the 1970's." (Shires 2007, 189) David Foster, a small time actor in Hollywood during the 1970's came out of the hippie gay scene, attended Trinity Evangelical Divinity Seminary, and founded 'Mastering Life Ministries' to help people with sexual addictions. These are just a few examples that highlight the connection between the rise of the Christian right and the Jesus Movement. It should be noted, however, that this connection may be overdone. That a number of prominent Christian rights activists came out of the Jesus Movement doesn't necessarily lead to the conclusion that the rise of the Christian Right had its roots in that movement. One might just as well argue that the Christian Right had its roots in traditional America.

There can be no doubt, however, that the Jesus Movement had a significant impact on the church and on society.

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